

# Thinking and Talking About War: How the Public in Six Countries Discusses the Outbreak of the War in Ukraine

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## Abstract

The Russian aggression in Ukraine, launched on 24 February 2022, marked the return of conventional war in the European continent. While Western leaders have framed the ongoing conflict through a common narrative when speaking internationally, which varies in its national nuances, much less is known about the images and lenses that the European public uses to understand the conflict and the role that the European Union (EU) plays in it. Drawing on a unique set of qualitative data from a series of 12 focus groups conducted in six European countries 6 months from the start of the war (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain and Poland), this article illustrates how the participants perceive, discuss and frame the war in Ukraine and its consequences. By analysing how they organise and express their beliefs about the consequences of the war on their daily lives and what role they imagine for Europe and their own country in such a situation, this paper sheds light on the way people reason about important political events and to what extent these conversations diverge from the discourse used by political elites.

**Keywords:** European Union; focus groups; foreign policy; public opinion; Ukraine war

## Introduction

Back in the 1930s, Walter Lippmann (1998, orig. ed. 1922: 12–13) so described the mental image that Miss Sherwin from Gopher Prairie – presumably a template of the ‘common (wo)man’ – entertained of World War I:

She [i.e., Miss Sherwin] has never been to France, and certainly she has never been along what is now the battlefield. Pictures of French and German soldiers she has seen, but it is impossible for her to imagine three million men. No one, in fact, can imagine them, and the professionals do not try. [...] Miss Sherwin has no access to the order of battle maps, and so if she is to think about the war, she fastens upon Joffre and the Kaiser, as if they were engaged in a personal duel.

Despite progress in media imaging, what people think when they think of a war is still underexplored. What kind of mental images do people hold on to to give meaning to ‘events that are out of sight and hard to grasp’ (Lippman 1992, p. 12)? This is the question we address in this paper, looking at the ongoing war in Ukraine (2022–present day).

As Patricia Conover et al. (1991) suggested, along a line of reasoning first articulated by Lane (1959) in the 1950s, if we want to understand how people think about politics, we must listen to them and record how they reason about the reality they inhabit. For this

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purpose, 6 months after the start of the conflict, we carefully listened to what a group of about 90 people in six European countries said, engaging in moderated discussions about the war in Ukraine, its causes and consequences, in a context that allowed ideas to be shared and exchanged in a mutually respectful way. This paper reports some of the results of this listening. Our analysis focuses on two main topics: how important the war was perceived in the context of the day-to-day life of people and what role their country and Europe were perceived to have in such an international context.

The war initiated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 is particularly interesting for this purpose. First, it is a war of wide resonance and repercussions across Europe, being the first conventional war ever fought on our continent since the end of World War II. Second, it has also concretely affected citizens' personal lives in ways previous conflicts on the continent (e.g., the Hungary invasion in 1957 and the Bosnia war in 1991) have not done. The European public's attitudes towards the conflict have been extensively surveyed since the start of the war,<sup>1</sup> and scholarly research has been conducted on where European Union (EU) citizens stand on the conflict, the policies implemented by the European governments in support of Ukraine and similarities and differences in trends and positioning of European public opinion during the conflict (Gelpi et al. 2005; Isernia et al. 2023; Silverman 2024; Stolle 2024; Thomson et al. 2023; Truchlewski et al. 2023). However, relatively little has been done to qualitatively explore how people think about the war, what kind of narrative they use, which issues are felt to be most salient or troubling and how the way the war has been framed in public debate matches the way people frame it. This is the gap we intend to fill.

To do so, we draw upon a unique set of qualitative data from 12 focus groups conducted in six European countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain and Poland) in June and July 2022, a few months after the war's outbreak. Through a systematic content analysis of the transcripts, our paper explores how people discuss the causes, effects and consequences of this war, looking not only at the content of what they think but also at the way they organise their own beliefs and opinions and what narratives emerge. Thus, this study aims to offer a complementary perspective to the one provided by survey data through which to study how people form and discuss their ideas, opinions and policy preferences on a complex and elusive reality, such as the outbreak of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict.

This paper is organised into three sections. First, we introduce the used methodology, highlighting the contribution of focus groups as a method of investigation for understanding international relations and international crises. We then move to the substantive part, which is organized around three main themes: how much the war is salient and a source of concern for citizens, their view of the role played by political elites, and how they picture the international system and the EU role in it.

In synthesis, we find that the Russian–Ukrainian conflict occupies a salient place in people's minds. However, in the first 6 months of warfare, its importance was mostly conceived and discussed by participants in terms of direct consequences on their personal life, rather than in terms of the wider political, economic and social implications of the

<sup>1</sup>A first attempt to describe European citizens' attitudes on the war can be found in the Flash Eurobarometer 506 (2022), Standard Eurobarometer 99 (Spring 2023), Standard Eurobarometer 100 (Autumn 2023) and more recently Standard Eurobarometer 103 (May 2025).

conflict for their country and society or Europe. This line of reasoning does not match the one articulated by European political elites. The second finding is that, in this context, the discussion occurs without any explicit reference to the EU, which appears off the radar screen. However, and quite interestingly, when the conversation moves on possible solutions, conversations highlight a significant distrust for the capabilities of national elites and the EU resurfaces, shifting the emphasis from the local and national levels to the European one. However, our third finding is that, in this context, the perceived way Europe can contribute to the solution of the problems created by war is strongly affected by the national context in which the discussion takes place, with three different images that vie for attention: Europe as a civilian power; Europe as a would-be superpower, Europe as an interventionist actor on an equal plane with China, Russia and the United States; and last, a neutral Europe, whose interest lay far away from the Ukraine battleground.

## Theory and Methods

### *The Role of Narratives*

The role of images and language and how they convey, build and deconstruct existing narratives has long been a subject of study for International Relations scholars, which is hardly surprising given their fundamental function in constructing both individual and collective identities (Somers 1994). Narratives are often employed as instruments to create shared values, foster a sense of belonging and forge relationships within specific social or national groups (Eliasz et al. 2024; Hart 1992). Moreover, state actors continuously manipulate narratives to preserve national or political identities and address domestic and international crises (Subotić 2013, 2016). In high-tension or crisis situations, states rely on well-established autobiographical narratives to ‘bridge the gap’ between the need for a policy shift (to confront concrete threats) and preservation of their ontological security (Kinnvall 2004).

All this considered, the purpose of this article is neither to provide an exhaustive reconstruction of the debates on the definitions, origins and interrelations of narratives in international relations (Oppermann and Spencer 2022; Roberts 2006; Sadriu 2021; Shenhav 2015; Suganami 1999, 2008) nor to analyse how political elites view themselves and their role in times of conflict through these narratives (Callahan et al. 2006; Colley 2019). But rather, to examine how narratives find a place in the discourse of the general public as temporally situated representations of events, shaped through individual or collective framing that identifies actors, responsibilities and their characterisations.

Such narratives draw upon both shared and personal imaginaries and constitute the basis upon which public opinion is shaped (Freistein et al. 2024; Kangas et al. 2014), but they are also the material through which people give meaning and purpose to a reality that is often quite distant from their experience. We search, listening to conversations, for an echo of these narratives, to explore, when people discuss public issues, how they bridge the gap, reported by students of public beliefs since Lippmann, between ‘personal troubles of milieu’ and ‘the public issues of social structure’, the reluctance or difficulties to define ‘the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction’ (Wright Mills 2000, p. 3).

Especially in foreign policy, the relationship between an event and its narration has often been observed through a top-down dynamic, with a predominant focus on the role played by politicians, traditional media and contextual factors in shaping the public (Happer and Philo 2013). Public opinion, for decades relegated to an accessory of foreign policy (Holsti 1992), has in the past three decades regained relevance in both public debate and scholarly attention, particularly with regard to its potential activation – stimulated by the media in challenging the dominant narrative (Baum and Potter 2008, 2019) or in responding to it (Powlick and Katz 1998). This literature has contributed through standardised measures crucial insights into the sources and effects of the public in foreign policy (Baum and Groeling 2010; Ciuk and Tavaréz 2024; Nomikos et al. 2025). Our paper intends to tackle the same issue, adopting a different perspective that looks at the formation and articulation of private opinions of public issues as a social and interactive process (Gamson 1992; Myers 2004), in which the conversation and the exchange of arguments and evidence shape opinions. The Russian–Ukrainian conflict, given its relevance, impact and widespread consequences, constitutes a crucial case for examining the multifaceted repercussions of war, spanning economic, social, political and international dimensions (Bocquillon et al. 2024; Isernia et al. 2024; Mader 2024). At the same time, it provides a unique opportunity to analyse such a process of public conversation, and especially how narratives emerging from the public engage with those issued by political leaders (Kvernbekk and Bøe-Hansen 2017).

### *Methodology*

To explore these topics, we conducted 12 focus groups 6 months after the start of the hostilities. A focus group is a structured and moderated discussion group, in which participants are encouraged to share their opinions and experiences on a specific set of issues using their own language, concepts and categories (Conover and Searing 2005; Morgan 1996). They are a well-established and widely used methodological tool in social and political research. However, they are less frequently applied in political science and political psychology (for exceptions, see Duchesne et al. 2010), and even less so in International Relations (for an exception, see Silver et al. 2023; see also Gaxie et al. 2011).

The main advantages of this research tool are two-fold. On the one hand, a focus group allows people to express their ideas and views using their own language, images and perspectives without superimposing the view of the researchers. The literature suggests focus groups are particularly useful for studying topics considered ‘sensitive’ to or ‘difficult’, as they get participants ‘to get access to more ideas or to express things that would otherwise be too painful, complex or ambivalent’ (Duchesne et al. 2010, p. 70). This makes the method particularly useful given the object of analysis: the ongoing Russian–Ukrainian conflict. Moreover, as discussed by Smithson (2000) and Myers (2004), the social interaction character of the conversation allows one to observe ‘a large number of within-group interactions in a short period of time’ (Smithson 2008; see also Myers 2004). Exposure to shared opinions and, at the same time, to divergent views generates a discussion in which participants can elaborate on a complex topic and even clarify their own views of it during the discussion (Mors et al. 2013). The analysis of focus group data can thus inform us about how people interpret and construct reality. In other words, differently from large-scale quantitative surveys, which are more appropriate for hypothesis

testing, focus groups as an exploratory tool (Morgan 1996) are better suited at understanding how people's views are constructed and elaborated in a social setting. They thus can be an especially useful method for studying everyday narratives in world politics and the related mechanisms of attributing meaning. As stressed by Stanley (2016), and confirmed by our results, focus groups can tell us 'about how political change instigated at an elite level is conferred a degree of legitimacy' (Stanley 2016, p. 3). Considering all this, we believe that focus groups are a particularly appropriate tool for an exploratory in-depth analysis of public opinion on EU foreign and security policies in a multi-country context.

The 12 online focus groups were composed by a cross section of adult citizens in six European countries: France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Spain.<sup>2</sup> While this set of countries is not representative of the European polity, they still capture a variety of conditions in terms of length of participation to the European integration process (France, Germany and Italy are three founding members; Greece and Spain joined in the 1980s, while Poland joined in the 2000s), geography (they are located in Western, Central, Southern and Eastern Europe) and foreign policy outlook (France and Poland occupy the two opposite ends of the spectrum of those in favour or sceptical of a more strategically autonomous EU, with the other countries in-between). Last, and quite unintentionally, despite having designed the research project well before the outbreak of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, the set of countries covers a wide spectrum of public positions on the war, with Poland definitely both more concerned and more supportive of Ukraine, France Germany and Spain in between and Italy and Greece more wary if not definitely sceptical of supporting Ukraine (Dennison et al. 2022; Krastev and Leonard 2022).

The research design, including recruitment procedures and guidelines for the moderators (see Appendix I, II), was identical for all countries. A total of 91 participants were recruited by a professional company (TOLUNA) among the members of an online opt-in panel via CATI-CAWI (Computer assisted telephone interview – Computer assisted Web interview). In each country, one group was a cross-section of the population, while the other was recruited among those who self-reported an interest in foreign and security policies. The composition of the groups varies in terms of age, education, political orientation and gender.<sup>3</sup>

The group discussions were moderated by professionals, native speakers and moderators. All focus groups lasted about 90 minutes and took place on the online video platform *Collabito*, managed by the polling company Toluna, between 27 June and 7 July 2022. All conversations, possibly also because they occurred online, were civil and balanced, engaging all of those involved. Conversations ran smoothly and allowed all participants to express their views, even when they disagreed. The transcripts of each focus group were translated into English using TOLUNA software. The data were analysed, using qualitative thematic analysis, by three independent coders in order to reach a consistent and cross-validated classification of the emerging themes and the overall direction of meaning. Following this initial phase, a comparison among the coders was conducted to harmonise the coding instruments.

<sup>2</sup>The focus groups were held online for logistical reasons: being still within the last months of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was deemed more practical to organise them online, so as to give the possibility to all participants (as well as moderators and the country national experts partners of the project, which attended in the background) to join.

<sup>3</sup>Find more details on the recruitment and composition of groups in Appendix I, section 2.



## Results: How Do People Discuss the Beginning of the Russian–Ukrainian Conflict?

In this section, we explore three topics about the Russian–Ukrainian conflict (2022–on-going) that emerged in all conversations: first, how people frame their understanding of and experience in war; second, what is the image and perception that participants have of political leaders and their responses to the war; and finally, how respondents discuss the possible solutions to the war and whether agency should be located at the local, national, or international level.

### *Framing War Through the Lens of Daily Life*

All conversations were opened by the invitation of the moderator to express the participants' major concerns about international affairs (see Appendix II). Perhaps not surprisingly, and despite not being specifically mentioned, the Russian–Ukrainian conflict was among the top issues raised, although it was not always the first topic to emerge. Moreover, and quite interestingly, the way that participants discussed the war was not particularly defined by ideological, moral or strategic lenses (though these elements were sometimes present), but mainly in terms of the war's effects on their personal and domestic conditions. In all groups and countries, with no significant difference between attentive and cross-sectional ones, participants used the war as leverage through which to express worries of a quite different nature, all of them very close to home, and not necessarily related to the war itself or its political and strategic consequences. Here are some examples.

Thinking about my daily life [...] but I am concerned mainly with the economic aspect. [...] I notice it when I fill up with petrol, when I pay the gas and electricity bills, when I see my stocks losing value. (IT24)

I think helping the Ukrainians can have a negative impact on France. [...] (FR23)

France is walking on eggshells [...] but it must also be careful about the economic repercussions from Russia. (FR21)

As anticipated, in response to the opening question about what the participants perceived as the most urgent international challenge, war was often mentioned first, but this question also sparked a wave of considerations on topics such as climate change, the energy crisis, migration, rising inflation, threats from misinformation and the influence of media biases in the presentation of international affairs. Psychological distress and concern for the wider humanitarian consequences of the war were also present but somehow shadowed by more personal worries. Departing from the way the war was framed by political elites at that time – namely as a blatant aggression against which Ukraine and EU were engaged in a fight between democracy and authoritarianism, stressing the moral duty to help an attacked country – there is in the participants' words little indication of significant ideological animosity or politico-strategic consideration. In other and simpler words, war was mostly seen (and discussed) as a catalyst of further, and some time pre-existing, domestic and personal problems in an already problematic social, economic and political European situation. Using the image suggested by Anatol Rapoport (1968), the Russian–Ukrainian conflicts mostly seen as 'cataclysmic' event, rather than a political act. In this connection, across groups, three topics were spontaneously raised in connection with the war: the economy, environment and migration.

Economy, the energy crisis, the inflation, the war, because it's all connected. (IT21)

The next sections deal with each theme separately.

### *Economic Issues*

Among participants, across all countries, economic issues were seen as the most pressing challenges that the war had contributed to create if not to worsen, followed by the environment and the humanitarian migration crisis. The most frequently mentioned economic issues were welfare erosion, rising unemployment, inflation, energy prices, utility bills and more generally, the overall increasing cost of living. Although they were recurrent and persistent themes in all six countries, they dominated discussions in Greece, France, Italy and Spain.

The war in Ukraine is a multilateral topic [...] as a consequence, the oil, the gas and all the relevant. As for the high prices, I filled my car with 105€, something that had never happened before. All of these have affected people's psychology along with COVID. (EL13)

As Italians, the main things for us are the economic crisis, [...] the drop in the buying power of the currency and bills that keep going up. (IT24)

I would probably have done the same if I were president. [...] I would be afraid of the economic repercussions. (FR25)

In Poland, despite the government neat and stern support for Ukraine, attentive participants expressed their concerns about the impact of incoming migration flows from Ukraine on the national economy and welfare:

The question is whether we as Poland can afford it (PL12).

I believe that the petrol crisis and the conflict in Ukraine are only the beginning of a larger economic crisis that is coming. (PL22)

France and Germany were the only countries in which some participants offered a wider interpretation of their economic concerns. Some German participants emphasised the potential social repercussions of the war, being it the risk of an increase in global poverty, economic hardship, or a widening gap in social inequality. Further, some French participants emphasised the strategic importance played by energy price in the international context and questioned the argument advanced by political leaders about the causal connection between the economic hardship and the war. Indeed, several French and German participants explicitly attempted to draw a line between the real effects of the war on national and European priorities and policies and the way social and political leaders had been using the war to downplay or deflect their responsibilities in mismanaging their domestic economic and social policies.

It will somehow affect everyone soon, due to the rising energy costs. Then everyone will somehow experience an increase in rent or in the housing allowance for condominiums [...]. (DE15)

and this resulting, will be the risk of poverty of many people (DE16).

With a crisis like Ukraine, we would have more weight against Russia, [...] if we could show that we can also produce energy and that we don't just rely precisely on Russia for this. (FR22)

In short, economic concerns were at the forefront of the discussion of the war, regardless of its proximity. With some slight variation in the emphasis, this work-related (Greece; Spain), price-related (Germany, Italy, Poland), or energy-crisis related worries (France, Germany), were present in all groups in all countries.

We're already being asked, in June, to limit our electricity consumption in anticipation of possible shortages in the near future. They're talking about reopening a coal-fired power station, it makes the very near future quite worrying. (FR14)

### *Climate Change*

Climate change and the environment were two other topics often discussed in connection with the outbreak of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict and listed among the most pressing international challenges. Keeping in mind that conversations occurred during the exceptional heat waves of the summer of 2022, the discussion about these issues was framed both independently and in connection with war. In both French groups, climate change was mentioned as an international challenge even before mentioning the war. Two distinct lines of reasoning emerged during the discussion.

The first line of reasoning was about the most appropriate level of authority at which to refer to for possible solutions. From this viewpoint, war and climate change (and, more generally, environmental issues) were often discussed in tandem. Although often the level of authority most appropriate to find a solution was referred to as an undefined 'other', all participants concurred that it was neither local nor national. It was the international level, variously mentioning NATO, the EU, cooperation among governments, etc., that was seen as the most appropriate to provide a solution to both the problems of the environment and war. For the participants, clearly both the war and the environment were issues whose solution was beyond the reach of local and national power.

[...] We will go back to lignite because there will be no electric power. [...] War is very harmful not only for citizens but for all people. [...] [Governments, EU and NATO] should all unite and get a solution globally. Climate change is global. It is about the whole world, it will start from somewhere and it will expand to everybody. (EL12)

[...] [The environments] is a problem that affects everyone at all levels. We all need to act together, but unfortunately the current political problems of Europe do not allow for such an advancement/resolution of these problems. (IT11)

[...] I believe that when it comes to energy or environmental security, international organisations should take care of it. [...] it is not enough to manage it on the level of specific countries, it has to be done globally. (PL11)

A second line of reasoning often found in the conversations is the connection between the problems raised by war and those by the environment, often perceived as potentially clashing with one another. Indeed, several participants raised the concern that the war might overshadow the environmental issue and revert the ranking of European and national priorities in this policy area (this line of reasoning was most frequently found in discussions in France and Germany). In other words, the war brought participants to realise that the war and its implications could negatively impact the EU and EU member states' commitment to a Green Transition, slowing down the fight to climate change and



consequently causing a lasting impact on participants' daily lives. The French and German groups were those more clearly connecting in their discussion about climate change the EU policies related to the Green Transition and the energy crisis to the war, suggesting that the war was a further element that contributed to worsening an already dire situation about climate protection.

[...] in addition to the war in Ukraine, of course, we must not forget climate protection. (DE22)

We have even reached the point where Germany, which had completely discarded coal, [says] but now coal is green, then we can now use coal, they have needed 2 or 3 months of time to modify it for the winter without having problems [...]. (ES22)

### *Migration*

After the economy and the environment, migration and its war-related media representation were topics that received quite some attention in the discussions. Contrary to expectations, the issue did not arise spontaneously in groups from Southern European countries, where migration has more often been a source of deep political polarisation (Greece, Italy). Instead, it was brought to the fore first in Poland, a country geographically closer to the Russia-Ukraine conflict and exposed to a massive inflow of Ukrainians fleeing the war. The discussions about migration mostly focused on the ability of the national economy to deal with the economic effects arising from the new flows of migrants from Ukraine rather than on the traditional stereotypical ingroup-outgroup debates on the topic in each country. In line with recent studies on the impact of the war on migration attitudes, our findings suggest a double standard at work in both the way Ukrainian refugees were perceived by the public and the concrete policies endorsed by EU Member States that were evaluated by the public (Düvell and Lapshyna 2022; Giancaspro and Lucenti 2024; Traub 2022).

I have always thought that the best way to tackle the refugee issue is to improve the situation in their country of origin so that they do not have to become refugees, as most people from Ukraine did not really want to come here and some would love to come back. [...] Our biggest role is to make it possible for them. (PL23)

The relationship between the media and migration flows and the different portrayals by the media of Ukrainian refugees, compared to other nationalities, was another key point of discussion:

[With Ukrainians], if they tell me that they are sending me a family, I will try to host them. But if they tell you that they are sending you a Libyan family, "no, what are you talking about?" People are not so receptive then, are they? (ES12)

I think that unfortunately in the world there are series A wars and series B wars, series A migrants and series B migrants, series A poor and series B poor. [...] [To the people of Ukraine] should be given as much support as possible and imaginable. However, I do not see all of this such involvement with other groups of people currently at war, such as in Africa, Syria, Afghanistan etc. is almost completely overlooked. To go back to what we said initially: it's about information. (IT18)

A narrative about the diversity of Ukrainians as compared to refugees from other (non-European) countries was present in all countries except Greece. Many participants were

also quick to note a difference in the way the discussion on the economic and social impact of refugees had been framed by the media and politicians in this war, as compared to the way it is traditionally portrayed in all countries.

I can see a big difference compared to the others. [...] In theory, they are all escaping war. But frankly I find that people are happier to have Ukrainian refugees than refugees of other ethnic origins. (IT26)

### Escape From the ‘Local’: The Failures and Inadequacy of Domestic Politicians

When the conversation moved from concerns to the performance of politicians in dealing with the war, our interest was not only to understand how participants assessed the responses of both the EU and their respective countries to the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, but also how they perceived and discussed the role national and European leaders and the EU had played in global affairs. We report three main findings: a general pattern of distrust towards national leadership, often judged as inadequate to deal with the local and national consequences of the war; a diffuse and outspoken distrust of the narrative conveyed by the elites and the traditional media about the war, its evolution and consequences; and last, a tendency to identify the EU institutions as the most suitable actor to face the complexity of present and future challenges.

Distrust about political leadership is clearly not a new phenomenon, and it has already been widely discussed by many (e.g., Bøggild et al. 2021; de Vreese 2004; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001). However, in the context of an important international crisis, such as the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, and in contrast with a set of reports based on survey data (Bordignon et al. 2022; Kizilova and Norris 2024), our conversations do not show any sign of a ‘rally round the flag effect’ (Fukumoto and Tabuchi 2023). Moreover, our data show that in the case of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, distrust in political elites was almost perfectly matched by distrust towards the media and the traditional channels of communication. Faced with the challenge of the war on the European continent, national political actors are described as incompetent, indifferent, or inadequate in finding solutions to both local and international problems such as war.

[...] Greece is left behind when it comes to evolutions, and the major reason is the politicians’ inactivity, who had done nothing all these years. Instead of us being the major country and have regulatory role and control our own lucks, we are at the mercy of the international evolutions and crisis. (EL18)

Along with competence and expertise, participants also questioned the international credibility of national politicians. This was especially true for those countries in which EU scepticism was on the rise, such as Italy, Greece, Spain and Poland.

[...] a country we should be able to stand in front of others [...] to have power and voice. (EL26)

Politicians [...] they think about here and now and they cannot think a couple of years ahead. I believe it to be impossible by definition to stop such a crisis. (PL24)

The participants to the focus groups tended to display a pretty cynical view of the political elites. Both leaders in government and those in opposition are depicted as not only

incapable, but also shrewd in maintaining and protecting their personal interests, for the sake of their short-term public approval, at the cost of the long-term interest of the general population.

[In order to answer the national issue it seems to be necessary] have real advisers, who do not heat the chair or are friends, but who are security experts. (ES21)

Alongside these criticisms, some participants also tend to insinuate suspects of corruption in the political and institutional systems, among leaders in government, and ‘other’ unspecified political forces that might be capable of making decisions or influencing those who are in a position to make them.

Well, you cannot, for example, elect the Federal Chancellor or the President. They just do it among themselves, and in the EU, as well. The 27 people, each representing a country, cannot be elected or voted out. Precisely the same with politicians. There is only a prearranged election. [...] That is why Germany cannot decide that much, because the people who are above Germany are too powerful, still. (DE13)

French groups were particularly vocal in channelling the feeling, which we found also among other groups, that politicians had shifted the consequences of war and other global challenges onto the shoulders of ordinary people.

We are very independent in terms of electricity from nuclear power plants, but on the other hand there has not really been any real incentive for households to replace their gas boilers. I feel that individuals are once again the losers in the end, being told to lower their heating or having to pay a lot, as a result of a very quick sanction, and not necessarily considering the environmental impact. (FR11)

Participants also expressed the need for their leadership to set an example, when asking citizens to adjust their habits:

I think we need exemplarity, so when a minister talks about carbon, for instance, and says “I’m sorry but my Falcon is waiting for me,” it makes you want to reply: “Just take the TGV and you’ll be there in an hour”. (FR28)

The critical view of the way politicians had dealt with the crisis was also extended to the media and the information system. Many participants showed in their intervention a keen interest in the role of the media in conveying specific messages and about the importance of communicating appropriately sensitive topics (such as war).

People are afraid of bad information. In my opinion, they often create too much alarmism. I also feel they are playing around with so many things. (IT16)

With no significant difference among attentive and not-attentive publics, the media representation of the war was perceived as actively fostering polarisation in society (Italy); over-representing the ‘righteousness’ of European ‘welcoming’ attitude of certain nationalities more than others (Spain); and fallaciously prioritising individual responsibilities over the need to find collective responses (France, on climate change and energy dependence). In some instances, and in line with the generalised distrust towards the political leadership, participants perceived that the elites were using the Russian–Ukrainian conflict to justify their inability to counter or contain the effects of previously existing challenges and crises:

I feel that Ukraine is taking the blame for a lot of things, and we do not really know whether it's justified. About the conflict, the origin of the inflation, the shortage of certain products, are all blamed on the conflict (FR14). Yes, it used to be Covid. (FR17)

Furthermore, participants were highly sensitive to the consequences of lack of or biased communication in contemporary society. In other instances, participants highlighted how war and its narration may have overshadowed other issues and crises, or wondered suspiciously why things were portrayed under a specific light:

We are distracted by the war, we have not set the pandemic aside, we have set the ecological transition aside (IT26). [...] 90% of the talk now is about the war, 10% about other news. (IT27)

### Local Concerns, European Solutions? Images of the EU in a Changing World

The preceding sections portrayed a comparative picture characterised by a general concern for the ramifications of the war in the economic, environmental and immigration realm and a diffuse diffidence towards both institutional and media actors and the activities they perform. In this last section we move to discuss how participants see the role of their country and the EU in the international system and what image of such a system they have. An interesting finding that emerges when the discussion shifts to possible solutions is the relevance of multilateral and EU institutions as main agents of change. While national leaderships were often deemed inadequate in addressing the consequences of the war on their citizens, multilateral organisations and, among those, the EU in particular are seen as the only possible way to address these problems. As mentioned in the first section, the EU institutions were rarely mentioned by participants when elaborating their concerns. However, when it comes to addressing the problems discussed, EU institutions were often considered the best (or only?) actor on which to rely upon to find adequate solutions.

Generally speaking, there are certain institutions that can prevent it, but they do not have sufficient mandate [...]. Because both the EU [...] and the UN via its representatives gather information and have full knowledge, they can come up with solutions. But those solutions and that knowledge are not used by specific countries. The nationalist interest is prioritised over general interest and this is a point affecting all countries, and [...] all people. (PL17)

While clearly the EU is not seen as a global panacea, for several participants it was identified as the actor the participants spontaneously turned on when looking for a solution.

No country in the EU is going to want to lose one iota of its sovereignty. We have a coalition of countries with common interests, which is really what the EU is.... (ES12)

Despite the generally limited knowledge of international affairs characterising our participants, from the discussions emerged a common understanding of the fact that European societies were living momentous times and that nation-states are particularly weak in navigating such a world. The image of the international system emerging from the discussion highlights the increasing role of China, Russia and the US. They were identified as powerful both in terms of '*Wealth, production, military, economy*' (EL21), and of

*'global influence and nuclear weapons technology'* (DE15). They were also seen as pursuing interests mostly opposed (with due differences) to those in Europe.

If China stopped, it would all be over. In fact, China does not even need tanks, this economic power is enough. Economic power is what defines it as a superpower. (IT15)

The participants in our focus groups tended to find in the multilateral approaches, the ones characterising the EU, and in the cooperation with a wider set of international organisations (such as the UN and NATO) a viable way out of their domestic worries:

Europe is already united, it's showing its unity and strength, and we are showing that we can help a country when it's at war, because France immediately retaliated by giving arms to Ukraine. I feel that France is playing its role. (FR25)

And our groups were also not oblivious of the nature of European approach to foreign policy, mostly based on diplomacy:

When I think of the United States, China and Russia, I see a clear difference to the EU. That is simply due to military reasons. I think the aggression that comes from these superpowers is different from that of the EU, which relies more on diplomacy. (DE16)

Similarly, they were also aware of the lack of unity of European institutions, that was also perceived as clearly impacting the EU's stance in the war:

[they are] Highly divided, interests are inconsistent, you cannot hear one voice, you can see when you look at leaders who met together – the Presidents (sic) of Italy, Germany and France, the Chancellor of Germany, and the President of France, they went to Kiev together, and there was no clear message, everyone spoke for himself. And it had no impact on that war, it caused no reaction. (PL22)

However, the aspiration for EU supranational solutions was not damaged by the image of a EU seen as militarily weak and diplomatically divided. From the discussion, three main images of the EU institutions in the world system emerge. The first, well exemplified among some German participants, tended to view the EU mostly as a civilian power; both German groups tended to picture the EU as an economic power, drawing inspiration from the country's history and identity as a 'civil power' (Aggestam and Hyde-Price 2020).

This Cold War mentality should not boil up again. NATO is there. But Asian countries or, for example, Russia and China would be merging, and this is creating more and more blocks. For example, that India is somehow neutral or still trades heavily with Russia in some cases, and, as a result, blocs are slowly forming indirectly. (DE15)

A second image of the EU, often found in groups based in Greece, but also in Italy and among some German participants, was one of a more 'opportunistic', and 'neutral' (term used by participants) EU and it was expressed in a certain uneasiness and a common feeling of 'being drawn into someone else's war', or being forced to pick a side.

Responsibilities lie in the middle. (EL26); They [Russia and the United States] are playing like the cat and the mouse trying to find who has more power (EL26);

Peace cannot be achieved by sending weapons. We need to negotiate and find other solutions. (IT16)



A third image, most common among French, Spanish, and some German participants, portrayed an image of a united, proactive EU. This image sees European unity as the key not only to consistently support Ukraine in the current military efforts and future reconstruction but also to acquire some international prestige and recognition:

[arms delivery] It's a very complex issue, but I think it's important to see what the Russian military does when it encounters no resistance. And the Russian military does not just conquer cities, it somewhat systematically attacks civilians. Look at Mariupol. (DE23)

Even when the EU was not automatically identified among the most significant actors on the scene, it was perceived as the most (perhaps the only one) suitable actor to stand a chance for such challenges. However, what type of actor it should be and how to respond to the challenges of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict appeared less clear.

I think Europe has the necessary strength to set an example, because, in France, we are quite advanced on environmental laws, whereas in the United States they're not at all, so if Europe also gets to it, I think we could have real strength (FR11). And when you say Europe, which authority do you think of in particular, which European authority? Do you think it should be Europe overall? (MFR10). All: 'Yes'.

Therefore, while participants to the focus groups deemed the current national political leaders somehow 'unfit for the role', our analysis finds that across all groups, the EU was a valuable actor, with the potentiality to positively contribute to the present and future predicaments. However, our findings also show that the way participants framed their views on the EU and its role was profoundly affected and inspired by their own national foreign policy cultures, with a significant division existing between those countries inspired to a view of the EU as a 'civilian power', those leaning towards a view of the EU as a potential superpower and an intermediate group perceiving the EU as a 'neutral' Switzerland writ large.

## Discussion

The Russian–Ukrainian conflict has disrupted the European continent's *status quo*, producing economic, social, and political effects that have profoundly shaped public debate. Owing to its unprecedented characteristics in the history of the EU, the war offers a unique opportunity to study how public opinion sees and discusses war. This study examines the ways in which the public in six European countries formed its views on the Russian–Ukrainian conflict 6 months into the war; what concerns it raises, and where the solutions should come from. To do so, we drew upon a unique set of qualitative data gathered from 12 different focus groups conducted in six European countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain and Poland), between June and July 2022.

The discussions that unfolded before us return an interesting ambivalence most people showed when invited to discuss such a complex issue as the outbreak of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict and its consequences. We found that participants in discussing the war focus on their personal troubles and immediate concerns; but at the same time, when it comes to solutions, the European level is clearly seen as more viable than local or national approaches. This ambivalence between a parochial view of the troubles created by the war and the global approach to their solution suggests two sets of considerations. The first is a confirmation we have from a long strand of studies that stress the difficulty most

people have in ‘contextualizing’ a complex issue such as war, preferring to ‘morselize’ the political world around them to better understand it (Lane 1962, pp. 350–356). We found in these conversations an echo of a shortcoming often reported by students of public beliefs when people discuss public issues: the missing connection of their own ‘personal troubles of milieu’ with ‘the public issues of social structure’ and the reluctance to define ‘the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction’ (Wright Mills, 2000, p. 3). The awareness of such a connection between what is personal and what is collective has been made, if possible, even more complicated and indirect since the time in which Mills denounced this gap, because the ‘fluid modernity’ (Bauman 2000, p. 8) has made the ‘remoteness and unreachability of systemic structure’ even more elusive and unstructured.

Not surprisingly, in describing the predicament in which they (and us) all were and still are, most people framed the Russian–Ukrainian conflict in terms of its consequences for their own daily lives. This highlights how the ideological narrative endorsed by the elites, mostly focused in ideological and strategic terms in articulating the need to resist Russian aggression was only marginally evoked by participants and never systematically integrated into the way the participants thought and formed an opinion about the war. Interestingly enough, this parochial approach to the war and its consequences is in line with some evidence coming from survey data (De Vries and Hoffmann 2022; Isernia et al. 2023; Thomson et al. 2023). These seem to suggest that while large majorities of Europeans declare themselves to be worried, concerned or threatened by the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, when they are asked whether the international situation is a priority, the salience of this issue pales in comparison to others, apparently more pressing issues, such as the economy and climate change. As an example, in the April 2022 Eurobarometer, on average 81% of the public in the EU-27 was ‘personally worried about the war in Ukraine’, but in the June–July 2022 Eurobarometer only 12% of the public mentioned the international situation as ‘the most important issue’ facing their country. The war is often seen as a background factor that triggers effects in domains closer to people’s personal milieu rather than being a primary topic of discussion. It acts as a wider cognitive container in which to articulate and sometimes overstress pre-existing concerns. On this specific issue, these data qualify some of the findings emerging from the rally-round the flag (Kizilova and Norris 2024; Mader 2024) and from the ‘bellicist integration hypothesis’ (e.g., Genschel 2025; Kelemen and McNamara 2022) about the relationship between external threat and support for European integration in defence and foreign policy, suggesting the possibility that this relationship is mediated by the perceived nature of the impact of the war on peoples life.

Within this setting, politics is often viewed with suspicion, and politicians are characterised by a general distrust. This disposition is directed towards national politicians – seen as incapable or unsuitable to address the raised problems – and towards the institutional systems themselves – considered ineffective in providing adequate

<sup>4</sup>This is in turn consistent with survey data from the period under analysis. According to Eurobarometer 97 (Summer 2022), regarding question QA6a.9, ‘How much trust do you have in certain institutions? For each of the following institutions, do you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it? The (NATIONALITY) Government (%)’, the share of respondents indicating ‘tend to trust’ declined overall in the six countries considered in this study compared to the Standard Eurobarometer 96 (Winter 2021–2022). In Summer 2022, the average level of trust across the six countries stood at 29%, below the EU average of 34%.

responses.<sup>4</sup> The scepticism characterising participants also extends to the sphere of media, perceived as excessively unstable, influenced by various powers, and marked by the presence of false or misleading information.<sup>5</sup>

In such a delusional context, however, we recorded a second, somehow contradictory, element. While international problems, such as the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, are mainly felt through their impact on local contexts and local actors, when people are invited to consider how these problems should be addressed they follow an opposite path, traveling a distance between their own troubles and worries to a wider political context. Participants, in turning their sight to the future, look beyond the locality and the nation to a wider international context, even though this is the context in which the negative effects originally arise. Thus, the same contexts and actors initially deemed untrustworthy or simply ignored (as the EU) are later assigned the responsibility of finding solutions to the perceived problems, by investing in, appointing, or voting for someone at the international level and within the EU to find a ‘common’ solution to local issues. In short, while leaders do not enjoy public trust and appear to have struggled to manage the impact of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, the EU is perceived by many as the most capable (or possibly the *least* incapable) actor in addressing the global challenge of this magnitude. Participants thus appear to be calling for at least a ‘supranational’ intervention to address both local and international issues. In this context, the war on the one hand challenges if not undermines the legitimacy of national leaderships but on the other hand taps a potentially and implicitly broader support towards European institutions, suggesting the complexity if not sheer ambivalence among public opinion about the role and the legitimacy of the EU in turbulent times. These findings seem to converge with those explored in the survey-based literature on the impact of the war on support for further integration in the security and defence domain (Fernández et al. 2023; Genini 2025; Mader et al. 2024). This reasoning seems also to be in line with what Construal Level Theory suggests (Trope and Liberman 2010), that the level of categorisation is a function of the psychological distance from the object: the more psychologically distant an object is perceived, the more abstract its characterisation. Expanding this analogy to our specific case, the conversations we listened to seem to suggest that, for most people, the more psychologically distant and complex the goal is – and the Russian–Ukrainian conflict perceived as such by most of those we listened to – the stronger in power and more powerful in authority is the level of agency deemed appropriate to achieve the desired goal of solving the issue. This process seems to underlie the systematic reference by our participants to Europe and the EU as the most appropriate level of authority to address the challenge represented by the war.

Conversely, and understandably due to the mixed composition of the focus groups, formed by citizens and not by policy experts, while the idea that solutions should be supranational rings a loud bell, the image that participants portray of the EU is still vague. If this is, as said, not particularly surprising, the way in which those images somehow reflected the orientation of the considered countries in international politics (e.g., ‘civil

<sup>5</sup>As in the previous note, also here the percentage of respondents opting for a ‘tend to trust’ when asked about their trust in media is lower in all the six considered countries, if compared to the Standard Eurobarometer 95 (Spring 2021), while their compared average is still lower than the European average of summer 2022 (38%): 34%.

power' for Germany; 'neutrality' in Greece and Italy; more prone to intervention in France and Poland), also tells us once again about the impact of national and local context on participants' portrayal of Europe and the world.

## Conclusions

This study highlighted three key characteristics in the way people frame, understand, and organise their ideas related to the Russian–Ukrainian conflict. First, rather than understanding it via ideological, strategic or moral lenses, they mostly made sense of it via its impact on their surroundings and their daily lives. This highlights a mismatch between the discourse pursued by international elites and the public in our considered countries. We suggest this finding is particularly interesting, especially considering the timing of our analysis, 6 months into the start of hostilities. Second, while national elites are generally not trusted to be 'fit for the job', supranational solutions and in particular the EU is deemed as the most appropriate actor to face the incumbent international challenges. This happens despite the fact that the EU, as an actor, is not immune from public scepticism regarding its political effectiveness. Despite the EU's ambiguous role in relation to these areas of intervention, its prerogatives, and international standing, the EU is seen as a potentially unifying force capable of addressing various local and social needs. Third, the diverse images of Europe that emerged from these discussions resonate well with national political cultures and geography (e.g., Germany and the 'civil power' Europe; Italy and Greece and a 'neutral' Europe, France and Spain a proactive and assertive Europe). In this dynamic, the aspiration for a more united and effective EU clearly emerges, as well as the desire of a more cohesive and decisive EU, seen as the crucial and only way to manage global problems, respond to global challenges while mitigating their effects on national contexts, and allow, *de facto*, the survival of its citizens in a world increasingly perceived as threatening and violent.

Ultimately, the results highlighted in this paper indicate how different methodological approaches may yield a more nuanced, rich, and complex portrait of public attitudes, underscoring the need for future research to approach more systematically the reasons why evidence from qualitative approaches and survey-based findings converge or diverge, and to clarify the conditions under which each method provides a more accurate representation of public thinking.

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## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Appendix S1.** Supporting Information.

**Appendix S2.** Supporting Information.